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PAT HITCHCOCK, Associate Editor

VICTORIA S. BENHAM, Associate Editor

MARGUERITE BLAIR DEACON, Illustrator

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Practical jesters sometimes achieve results which far exceed their planning . . . death, for example. I suggest your next victim first undergo a thorough medical examination.



ARÉ you with me, Regan?"

"Yes," I said.

Albright shook his head. "What would you do if you didn't have to work for a living? Stare at the sky all day and think?"

"I'm listening."

"I know you're listening, but try to show it. When you look out of the window I keep feeling jealous of what it is out there that's got your interest. You're paying ten

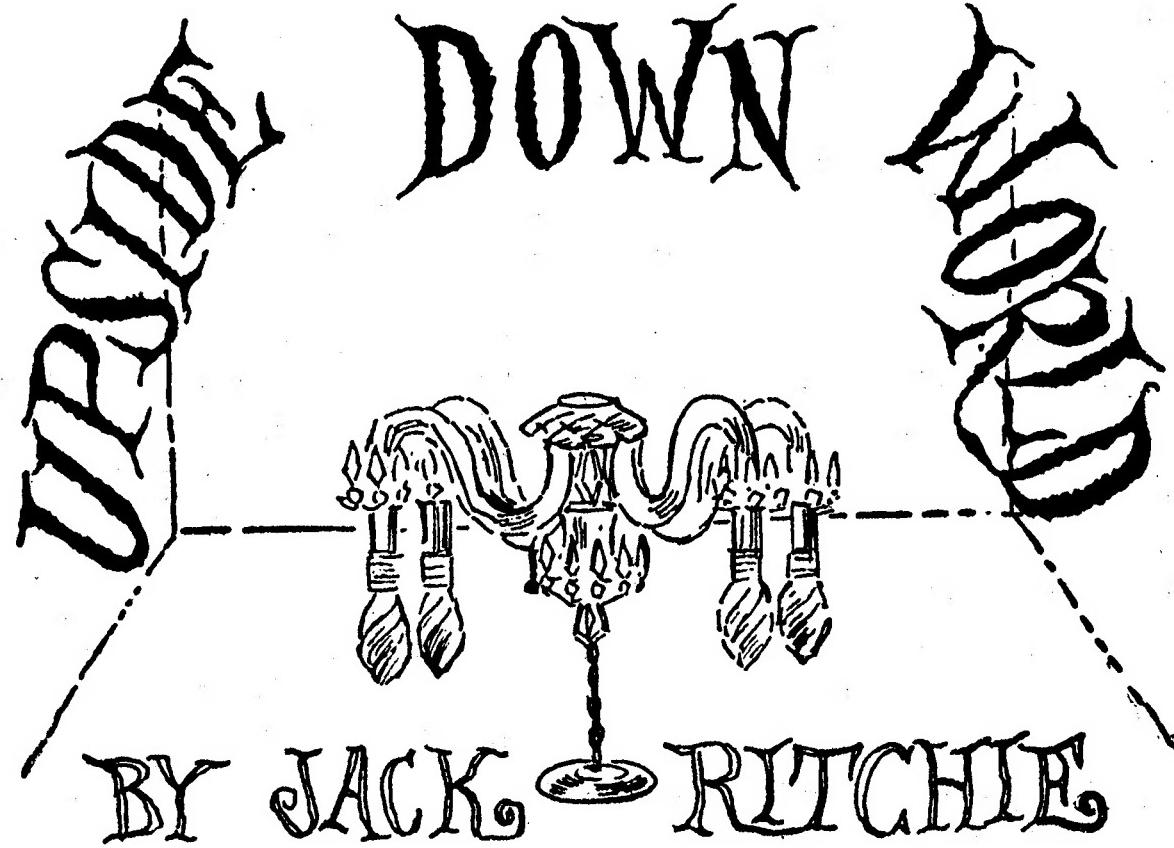
percent attention to me and my little earthly difficulties and the other ninety percent seems to be bumping around the universe."

"You were talking about Robert Cramer?"

Sam Albright sighed and handed me the folder. "Robert Cramer took out the policy five years ago. His heart was perfect then. Or, at least, sound."

My eyes went over the top sheet.

DOWN



"But he died of a heart attack?"

"Yes."

"How much is the death benefit?"

"Two hundred thousand dollars."

"There was an autopsy?"

"Of course. One of our company doctors was present when it was performed. Cause of death was a diseased heart. The condition had been developing for two or three years, he estimates."

"But still you want me to investigate?"

"Two hundred thousand dollars is a lot of money. The company *has* to investigate." He rubbed the back of his neck. "As far as I can see there's nothing wrong, except for one little thing that bothers me. At the autopsy our doctor noticed that Cramer's right hand—the fingers, thumb, and ball of the thumb—appeared to be seared. Not a great deal, but enough so that blisters would have developed if he had lived."

"He burned himself just before he died?"

Albright nodded. "Almost immediately before. Our doctor also extracted tiny fragments of glass from Cramer's fingers and hand. We had them identified at a laboratory. They were pieces of an electric light bulb."

"You're positive he died of a

heart attack? He wasn't electrocuted?"

"Definitely a heart attack. An electric shock could have brought it on, but there's no way of proving that. He might have been removing a hot bulb from a socket when it burst."

"Might have been?"

Albright smiled. "The interesting point is that it wasn't mentioned in the account of his death."

"When did he die?"

"Three days ago. He was at the apartment of a friend. A Peter Norton. According to Norton, Cramer dropped in one evening three days ago for a couple of drinks. He seemed to have been loaded before he got there."

"He drank heavily with his heart condition?"

"Either he didn't know about it or he didn't care. Around ten o'clock he became pale and complained that he didn't feel very well. Norton went to get him a glass of water. While he was in the kitchen, he heard Cramer cry out. When Norton hurried back to the living room, Cramer was on the floor and apparently dead. Norton called a rescue squad and they worked on Cramer for about an hour, but it was no use."

"Norton didn't have anything to say about the burnt fingers and the glass fragments?"

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"He didn't mention them at all.
I'll leave it up to you to ask."

"Who is Cramer's beneficiary?"

"A Miss Helen Morland."

"Miss?"

Albright smiled faintly. "It's even more interesting than that. He had a wife. Thelma. Until six months ago, *she* was his beneficiary."

"Does she know he made that change?"

"I don't know. But she'll find out soon enough."

"Were Cramer and his wife separated?"

"Not that we know of."

"What is the relationship between beneficiary and deceased?"

"We don't know that either. Technically it's none of our business. We can only guess."

"Can you tell me any more about Cramer?"

"He inherited money, but from what I've heard he had spent just about all of it. I think he had to scrape to make his insurance premiums."

"Anything on Norton?"

"He's single and he has money. That's about all I know."

I decided to see Peter Norton first.

He had an apartment on the third floor of the Merridith Building on the lake shore.

When he opened the door I gave him my name, showed him my

credentials, and stated my business.

Peter Norton was a big man with small wary eyes. He frowned. "What is there to investigate?"

"Just routine," I said. "We have to fill out forms."

He let me come in.

I saw only the large livingroom, but I had the impression that there were at least three or four other rooms in the apartment.

"What do you want to know?" Norton asked.

"Just tell me what happened here the night he died."

He lit a cigartte. "There isn't much to tell. Cramer came here at about eight that night. Wanted a couple of drinks and a lot of talk. Jim Barrows—that's my lawyer—was here and we all had a drink. Then Jim left, but Cramer stayed on. We talked and did some more drinking and then around ten Cramer suddenly got pale and asked for some water. I went to get it. While I was in the kitchen I heard him cry out. When I got back here he was on the floor. I called the rescue squad, but that didn't do any good. He was dead." Norton puffed the cigarette. "That's all there was to it."

"What was Cramer doing when he died?"

He frowned. "Doing? Nothing. Just sitting on the davenport."

"At the autopsy it was found

that the fingers of Cramer's right hand had been seared slightly and also that fragments of glass were imbedded in them. Would you know how that happened?"

Norton went to the liquor cabinet. "I'm afraid I can't help you."

"It didn't happen here?"

"No."

"Then when he came here, his hand was already injured?"

"I didn't notice. I suppose so."

"Was his hand bleeding?"

Norton flushed irritably. "I told you I didn't notice. Why all the questions about his hand? What's that got to do with his death? He died of a heart attack."

"Yes," I said. I was conscious of the faint odor of paint and turpentine coming from somewhere in the apartment. "Didn't Cramer complain about his hand?"

"He didn't say anything to me." Norton poured a drink and then remembered me. "Care for anything?"

"No, thank you."

"Cramer was pretty loaded when he came here. He was feeling no pain, and you could take that literally. I don't know where he cut his hand."

"How long have you known Cramer?"

Norton shrugged. "Two, three years. Got introduced at some party or other. I don't remember."

"Do you know a Miss Helen Morland?"

He looked at me and then after a while he said, "Why?"

"She's his beneficiary."

Norton's eyes narrowed and a thin hard smile came to his face. But he said nothing.

"Cramer had a wife," I said.

Norton's hand gripped the glass tightly. "You've never seen Helen Morland?"

"No. I don't know her."

His mouth twisted. "Nobody does. You get the feeling that she's on earth just to look around and decide if there's anything worth being interested in. I don't think she's found anything and I don't think she ever will. If she has any emotions, she's never used them."

Norton swallowed half the drink. "She's not bored. It's not that simple. She's just mildly surprised that anybody else exists and she wishes they would go away. I wonder sometimes if she isn't lonely. You almost feel like asking her, 'Where did you come from?'"

"Was Cramer in love with her?"

"Yes," Norton said savagely. "Everybody who . . ." He finished the drink. "I'm sorry I can't help you any more about Cramer, Mr. Regan."

I looked out of the window at the frame-to-frame blue of the lake

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and the sky. "You mentioned that when Cramer came here, a Mr. Barrows, your lawyer, was here too. Had Cramer ever met him before?"

"No."

"And so naturally you introduced them to each other?"

"Of course."

"And they shook hands?"

"Natur . . ." He stopped.

I smiled faintly. "If Cramer had injured his hand before he got here, I wonder if he would shake hands with anybody. Even if he did, I'm sure that Mr. Barrows would have noticed the condition of the hand and at least made some remark about it. I'll ask Mr. Barrows."

There was silence and Norton glared at me.

"There is one other thing I'd like to mention," I said. "Norton received his injury shortly before, or at the time, he died."

Norton took a deep breath. "All right. Around ten o'clock one of the light bulbs in a lamp burned out. Cramer decided to replace it. He burned his hand when he touched it and it burst. Maybe he just grabbed it too hard. I told you he had a lot to drink."

"The bulb burst and then he died?"

Norton went back to the liquor cabinet. "I didn't even know that

he had heart trouble. He just collapsed and died."

"Why did you think it so important to deny that Cramer got cut and burned here?"

Norton waved a hand. "I just didn't think it mattered. The only important thing is that Cramer is dead."

"Which lamp burned out?"

Norton almost shrugged. "That one over there."

I went to the lamp on the end table next to the davenport. I removed the shade and looked at the bulb.

"What did you expect?" Norton snapped. "I put another bulb in the lamp."

I ran my finger over the bulb and showed it to him. "Dust. A couple weeks' worth."

Norton's face darkened. "I took a bulb from another lamp and it happened to be dusty."

But his fingerprints would have shown in the dust on the bulb—and there had been none. I decided not to mention that for now. I picked up my hat. "Thank you for your trouble, Mr. Norton."

The superintendent-janitor of the building was a thin man with the harassed look common in his job. He relaxed when I identified myself and he found out that I wasn't going to ask him to do something.

"Did you know Mr. Cramer?

The man who died here three days ago?"

"I saw him off and on. He always seemed pretty well loaded."

"What kind of a tenant is Mr. Norton?"

The janitor grinned slowly. "Okay. But you have to watch him."

"Why?"

"Like don't shake hands with him until you're sure he doesn't have one of those buzzers in his palm." His grin broadened. "I don't mind too much, though. He's generous to me at Christmas time."

He nodded his head at a thought. "He's got a real sense of humor. Once he had me switch the water faucets in the bathroom of a couple in the next apartment. You know, make the cold water come out of the hot tap and the other way around."

"Did he know the people?"

"Just to talk to, I guess."

"You let yourself into their apartment when they were gone?"

He nodded cautiously. "It was just a joke. No harm done. When they complained to me about their plumbing I went up there and fixed things right again. But they're still wondering what happened. Mr. Norton and me never let them in on the gag."

"Is Mr. Norton's apartment now

in the process of redecoration?"

"Not by the owners of the building."

"But he is having something done?"

"Sure. Been three or four workmen going up there. But I guess they're through. Haven't seen them today."

"When a tenant wants to redecorate his apartment himself, he has to have permission from the owners of the building?"

"That's right. We don't want them to do anything wild."

"And Norton asked for permission?"

"Well . . . he forgot. I talked to him about it though, and he said he was just having a little work done to make the place more cheerful. So I told him okay. He's a good tenant and he's been here for years."

"Did you see what kind of work was being done?"

"No. I got my own work to do."

When I left him I drove to Lincoln Avenue. The Cramer apartment was cluttered with oversized furniture. I had the impression it had originally furnished a larger apartment.

Thelma Cramer was dark-haired and tense. "Yes, Mr. Regan?"

I decided to tell her about the change of beneficiary, if she didn't know already. "Mrs. Cramer, do

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you know that you are no longer the beneficiary of your husband's insurance policy?"

The color drained slowly from her face. "But that's . . . that's impossible. When Bob took out the policy I *know* that I was designated as beneficiary."

"I'm sorry, Mrs. Cramer, but he changed that. Six months ago."

Her eyes narrowed. "Who is the beneficiary now?"

"A Miss Helen Morland."

"Why didn't your company tell me about this before?"

"It's not our business, Mrs. Cramer. A man may change his beneficiary at any time he wishes and it is up to him to inform the interested parties—if he chooses to do so."

Mrs. Cramer twisted a handkerchief. "She's not going to get away with this. I'll take it to court."

"That's your prerogative, Mrs. Cramer. Do you know Miss Morland?"

She laughed harshly. "I've *seen* her. That much I can say. But whether she really saw me or not, I couldn't say. I was just an interruption, an unimportant interruption."

She was silent for a moment and then continued. "There have been other women in Bob's life. He was that kind of a man. But they were just incidents to him. It was differ-

ent when he met Helen. I could tell that right away. When I found out who was . . . doing that . . . to my husband, I went to her and asked her to leave him alone. I don't know what I expected. Perhaps a scene. But she looked at me . . . those strange gray eyes studied me curiously for a few seconds, and then she said that as far as she was concerned, I could keep Bob home."

Thelma flushed at the recollection. "He was completely infatuated with her, but she didn't want him. I don't think she wants anybody. After she told me to take back my husband, she just turned and went back to the picture she was painting. I wasn't even in the room anymore. She forgot that I was still there. There was nothing for me to do but leave."

"But your husband kept seeing her?"

"Yes. There was nothing I could do about it." Her face showed perplexity. "I don't think anything ever really . . . happened between them. He even talked to me about her. He told me that he would go to her studio and just watch her. He never knew if she was aware of him or not."

Thelma shook her head. "There's no expression on her face, really. I don't believe she's ever happy or sad, like other people."

"Miss Morland is an artist?"

"I suppose. She paints, but I don't believe she ever exhibits or sells anything. I don't even think she's interested in painting. It's just something to do . . . while she's waiting."

"Waiting?"

Her eyes widened. "I don't know why I said that. But it's true. I feel that she's waiting for . . . something."

"Did you know that your husband had heart trouble?"

"No. He never mentioned anything about it to me."

"Do you think that he knew about it himself?"

"I couldn't say. The last six months . . . ever since he'd met her . . . he'd been ill. You could see that. It might have been his heart, but I don't think it was that alone. He drank a lot, although he shouldn't have. He always passed out after a while. He couldn't sleep, and he wouldn't eat."

"How did your husband happen to meet Miss Morland?"

"Peter Norton introduced him." Her hands clenched. "I think he did it just to see how she would affect Bob. Almost a practical joke."

"Who was his doctor?"

"Dr. Farrell. He has an office in the Brumner building."

I rose. "Thank you for your time, Mrs. Cramer."

I drove to the Brumner building and took the elevator up to Dr. Farrell's office. When the receptionist showed me in, I presented my credentials.

"Dr. Farrell," I said. "A Robert Cramer, one of your patients and insured by our company, died three days ago."

Dr. Farrell was a graying man in his middle fifties. He nodded. "I read about that." He had his nurse bring a card from the filing cabinet and studied it. "Cramer's been a patient of mine for over ten years. About two and a half years ago, I noticed the heart condition. I told him about it, trying not to alarm him unduly. I put him on a sensible schedule and gave him all the usual cautions and advice." He looked up. "When I saw him six months ago the heart condition had considerably worsened. Also, he was in other ways not in the best of health—general rundown condition. This time I impressed upon him strongly the need to take care of himself. Apparently he did not follow my advice."

"His wife said that he didn't tell her about his heart."

"I suppose he thought she'd worry."

"Yes. I suppose that was it."

And then I drove to 231 Brainard Street. It was a four-story building among other red brick buildings,

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in an older part of the city where quietness remained.

I sat in my car and smoked a cigarette and when I had finished, I went into the building and up to the studio on the top floor.

Yes, Helen Morland had gray eyes and she watched me without expression while I told her why I was there.

"Did you know that Cramer had trouble with his heart?"

Her lips had been about to say, "No," but then she seemed almost to frown for a moment. She stared at me and said, "Yes. He told me." Then she turned and moved away from me.

"Did you know that you are the beneficiary of Cramer's insurance policy?"

She stopped in front of an easel.
"Yes."

It wasn't my business, but I said, "Why?"

She picked up a brush and painted a single line. "He said he loved me. He had no money, but he wanted to give me something eventually."

"He was giving you his life. Did that interest you?"

She made another line and went over it.

I moved about the room. There were paintings completed and uncompleted and I felt that all of them had been forgotten the moment they had been taken off the easel. Some were representations, some impressions, and often there were just simple strokes, up and down, that meant nothing except to say that she had been thinking of something else when they were made.



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"Do you think you have a right to the money?"

"He wanted to give it to me." Her eyes were on me now. "Are you angry about that?"

She had soft light hair, but it was difficult to tell the exact shade. It seemed to shimmer in the sunlight.

"Mrs. Cramer is going to fight the bequest."

"Of course," Helen said. "I expect that. But I don't believe we will get to court. We will agree upon something. I will be satisfied with fifty thousand."

"When Cramer died his right hand was slightly burned and he had bits of glass in it. Do you know anything about that?"

"No."

I went to the big windows overlooking the rooftops. "What is money to you—fifty thousand dollars of it?"

"It frees time."

"To think of people? Of things? Of ideas?"

"To wonder."

I could see the public library, the castle of books. When I was a boy I had tried to read them all. Perhaps I should never have tried. And above the buildings, the sky. The top of a cage? I found myself saying, "Do you listen when you look up there? Do you hear anything?"

She was beside me. "So faintly,

A music I cannot quite understand." Her eyes were on my face. "Why did you ask that?"

"I don't know." I came back to this time and this earth. "Thank you for your time, Miss Morland. I'll be leaving now."

At the door we looked at each other again and then I turned and went away.

Once during that night I got out of bed and stood at the window. The stars were clear and just a step beyond the reach of the mind.

Someone else was watching them too. Yes.

What was she thinking?

In the morning I saw Albright. I told him how Norton had explained about the light bulb and I told him about the undisturbed dust on the one I'd examined.

He frowned. "It doesn't sound important, but why would he lie about something like that? Do you think it's worth working on this a little more?"

"Yes."

"You'll talk to Norton again?"

"Yes. But first I'd like to see his apartment when he's not home."

Albright looked unhappy.

"You can get me a ring of keys?"

"Sure, but you just can't . . ."

"I lost the key to my apartment, Sam. I just don't want to bother the janitor."

He sighed. "All right. But if you get caught, the company knows nothing about it." He studied me. "I have the vague feeling that you're actually interested in this case."

"Yes," I said.

Albright left the office for five minutes and came back with the ring of keys. "I haven't used these for fifteen years. I hope locks haven't changed much since then."

I phoned Norton before I left Albright's office. There was no answer. I tried again from a drugstore a block from Norton's apartment building with the same result.

When I got up to the third floor, I spent ten minutes at the door buzzer and when that got me nothing, I took it for granted that Norton wasn't home.

I used the ring of keys and on the fourth try the door opened for me.

Norton was home.

He sat in an armchair facing the door and his eyes stared at me.

But he didn't move and he never would.

I closed the door behind me and moved closer to him.

Whatever had killed him, it was something that left no mess. There was no gunshot wound, no stab.

I went past him and through the apartment. It was large and well-furnished, but whatever Norton's

personality, it was not reflected in his furniture. The place was as impersonal as a stage set.

I came to the bedroom where the smell of new paint lingered. It had the neutral look of a hotel room—twin beds, tables and lamps, and two dressers. I tried the drawers and found that they were empty. The closet was bare.

The room was new. Everything about it was new. I examined the woodwork, the doors, the window framing, the floor moulding. All of them were of wood painted for the first time.

Everything was in order—an average guest room. Everything just the way it was supposed to be except . . .

The switch plate controlling the overhead light fixture was too high. They are usually from four to four and a half feet from the floor. But this one was at face level.

I tried the switch and the overhead light flashed on. I flipped the toggle several more times. There was something else wrong . . . something I could feel . . . yes, I could *feel* it.

I looked at the switch. Normally you press the toggle up to turn on the light and down to shut it off. But this one was reversed—down to turn on the light and up to turn it off.

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and now the wastebasket next to the French desk caught my eye. I extracted brown wrapping paper and string. Beneath them lay scraps of picture moulding and torn scraps of heavy cardboard.

I put the pieces together. It had been a framed print, twelve by sixteen inches, and the small lettering at the bottom gave it a name. *The Surrender of Cornwallis*. A column of men, resplendent in their red uniforms were marching from their redoubts.

I smoothed the wrapping paper. The package had come from the Barclay Art Shop on Wells. There were no stamps and so evidently the package had been delivered—probably since the last time I saw Norton alive, or I would have noticed the wrapping in the wastebasket when I had been here before.

Norton had received the package, opened it, and then smashed the frame and torn the print into small pieces.

I studied the pieces I'd put together again. Yorktown, October 1781, and the troops marching out to surrender behind a band that played a tune called . . .

I stared at Norton. He had been a man with money and a man who thought switching water faucets an example of wit. Perhaps . . .

I went through his wallet. Noth-

ing interested me except a small business card.

Arthur Franklin
General Contractor
2714 Virginia Street
BOardman 7-8136

Norton's topcoat lay over the back of the davenport. I went through the pockets and in one of them I found a handkerchief stained with faint brown. Blood?

I put it in my pocket and then I went through the apartment again wiping fingerprints off anything I might have touched.

When I left, I allowed the door to the hall to remain slightly ajar. I wanted somebody to find Norton soon and I wanted to know how he had died.

I took the handkerchief to the Lytton & Brandt Laboratories and after a while one of their technicians came back to me with the report.

"It's paint," he said. "Brown. Or rather auburn. Low saturation, low brilliance. Ordinary, somewhat cheap grade interior gloss paint. Could be used for any number of purposes."

Arthur Franklin's office was a small building in one corner of a yard in the valley under the viaduct on Twenty-seventh. He was a big man who enjoyed the stub of a cigar. "What can I do for you?"

I showed him my credentials. "I

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understand that you recently did some work for a Mr. Norton?"

He grinned faintly. "Some."

"Just what did you do?"

He thought it over for a moment. "You a friend of his?"

"No. This is my work."

He decided to tell me. "Craziest order I ever had. But it was his money and he wanted it done. Wanted it kept quiet too. He gave me and each of the boys something extra while we were working so that we wouldn't let anything slip to anybody around there."

Franklin settled back in the chair. "We went through a lot of trouble. Had to change everything. Everything. Put the rug on the ceiling and bolted all the other furniture up there too. We had the chandelier sticking up from the floor."

Yes, I had been right.

"An upside-down room," he said. "Yes, sir. Lot of work for a practical joke, but I guess he could afford it. We put the floor moulding on the wall at the ceiling and reversed and hiked up the doors. Had to blank out the windows too and make it look like a wall. Wouldn't want the victim to look out of the window and see that the world wasn't upside down too."

He savored the situation. "Norton didn't tell me what the room was for, but I could guess. Heard

about things like that before. He has somebody up at his apartment and gets him to drink enough to pass out. Then Norton carries him into the room and leaves him there. And Norton waits outside, looking through a peephole."

Franklin chuckled. "His friend comes to, but he's still groggy. He looks around and he thinks he's on the ceiling. The guy gets panicky. He tries to crawl up the walls to get down to what he thinks is the floor. I hear it's a riot."

Yes, I thought, Cramer woke up in the room. The furniture loomed up above him and he was on the ceiling. He would be frightened—terrified. What horrible thing had happened? In a moment he would fall. Instinctively he had clutched for the nearest thing—the chandelier. His heart had pounded madly and in that instant he had suffered his heart attack and his fingers had crushed the bulb.

"I guess it was a short-time joke, though," Franklin said. "Norton called us back two days ago and he had us tear out the whole thing. A rush job too. We had to put everything back where it was before. Just exactly."

But you forgot one thing, I thought. You forgot to move the light switch back down to where it belonged and forgot to reverse it.

Cramer had died in the upside-down room and then it had been Norton's turn to panic. Cramer couldn't be found there. There would be publicity. Perhaps even criminal charges.

Norton would have preferred to have Cramer's body out of the apartment altogether, but that was almost impossible. He might be seen carrying it. So he had dragged Cramer to the livingroom and pretended that he died there. There had been no reason for anyone to search Norton's apartment and discover the upside-down room.

Probably Norton hadn't even noticed the injury to Cramer's hand. Even if he had, he had thought that it was unimportant. Cramer had died of a heart attack and that was the big thing. Why should anyone ask about the hand?

The upside-down room. Perfect in every detail and he had even ordered a special print to fasten to the wall—a final touch. It hadn't arrived in time to be there for Cramer's death, but it had come yesterday or early this morning and he had torn it to bits and dropped them into the wastebasket. The print had shown British troops marching to surrender—marching behind a band playing an old English air, "The World Turned Upside Down."

"I wonder if his trick worked,"

Franklin said, amused by the idea.

Franklin wouldn't know, of course. He hadn't known Cramer, and hundreds of people die in the city of heart attacks. And when Cramer had died there had been nothing more specific in the newspapers than the mention that he had died "in the apartment of a friend."

When I left Franklin, I drove past Norton's apartment building. A squad car and an ambulance were parked at the curb.

I went downtown to the main office and saw Albright.

He listened to my story and then shook his head. "It's pretty fantastic, but it still won't help us any except to satisfy our curiosity. We still have to pay the claim. Norton could have gotten into a lot of trouble, but since he's dead, there doesn't even seem to be much point in bringing the story to light."

"It all depends on how Norton died. If he had a heart attack, the case is over."

Albright nodded. "I'll get in touch with the coroner and have him phone me when he gets around to looking at Norton. There ought to be an autopsy. I don't imagine a doctor was around when Norton died."

In the evening I was in my apartment when Albright phoned.

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told me, without preliminaries.
"Suicide?"

"Doesn't look like it. No note or anything like that. The police are making it their business now. I just talked to Lt. Henricks. He had the apartment searched from top to bottom. Couldn't find any poison."

"Norton might have swallowed all of it."

"Maybe. But he'd have kept it in something. A box or an envelope. Henricks didn't find anything. And it looked as though Norton had just come home when the poison took effect—his topcoat was lying on the davenport. It seems likely that he was poisoned somewhere else."

"Do the police have any place in mind?"

"Henricks didn't tell me, but I doubt it. This thing is only a few hours old. I imagine he'll start seeing everybody Norton knew."

"When did Norton die?"

"The coroner put it at about eleven last night, give or take a little."

When I hung up I made a drink and smoked a cigarette. I thought of things and I thought of her. Was she waiting? Would I be like the others? Would it be enough for me to watch and wait?

At ten-thirty I crushed out a last cigarette and drove to 231 Brain-

ard. When I got out of the car I looked up. Stubby columns of lights pushed up at the darkness from the skylight.

When I opened the street door I smelled paint.

In the dim hall light it was difficult to make out the exact colors, but I thought that the walls had been painted dark green and the wooden banisters brown. Auburn.

Six feet up the stairs, almost obscured by the shadow of the railing, hung a *Wet Paint* sign.

I pushed the buzzer at Apartment No. 1.

The janitor was in carpet slippers and about him hung the odor of beer. "Well?"

"When did you paint your hall?"

He scowled. "You got me out here just to ask me that?"

"Yes."

And then he saw my face and he knew that I wanted an answer. "Today," he said uneasily.

"Just today?"

"Sure." And then he corrected that. "Well, it was started the day before. The top floor. My son-in-law started around four in the afternoon. He's got a regular job and this was something extra."

I went up the stairs and behind me I heard him lock and bolt the door.

Helen's eyes went over me when she opened the door and let me in.

She smiled softly. "I waited for you."

"Peter Norton is dead," I said.
"He was poisoned."

She moved to the record player and turned the volume down slightly. "Yes?"

"Did Norton come here often?"

"He came to watch me and to talk. Sometimes I listened."

"Were you listening when he told you about the upside-down room?"

"Yes."

"Norton was here last night, wasn't he?"

"Would you like something to drink?"

"He was here last night," I said. "The halls are dim and he touched the wet paint. He wiped his hand on his handkerchief, but his fingerprints should still be on one of the banisters. They would prove that he was here last night."

She took two crystal goblets from a cabinet. "The police have not been here."

"They don't know about it. Only I do."

She smiled. "Then I needn't worry."

"Helen, I'll have to tell them."

She looked at me. "But why?"

"This is a murder case."

"And I would be the most obvious suspect? There would be an investigation? The police would find out who I am? Where I was?"

"Yes."

"I would not want that."

"Helen," I said. "Did you kill Norton?"

She held one of the glasses to the light for a moment. And then she said, "Yes."

On the record player the music came to an end. There was a click as another record fell into place. The music returned, but the room was cold.

"You didn't have to tell me."

"You asked. I can't lie to you. You know why, don't you? And you will not tell the police."

I said nothing.

She put down the glasses and moved abruptly to a picture leaning against a chair. "I don't even remember painting this. What was I thinking?"

"Did you have anything to do with Cramer's death?"

"Norton told me he was building the room. I knew that Cramer's heart was bad, very bad. And I knew that Cramer's insurance was in my name. I suggested to Norton that Cramer be his first victim. Norton didn't know why, of course." Her eyes searched mine. "Are you shocked? Why?"

"Suppose Cramer hadn't died?"

"I would have thought of something else."

"Is life or death so simple to you?"

She stared at another painting.

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"I like blue. More than any other color. I've never told anyone that before."

"Why did you kill Norton?"

"He was going to tell the police about me—unless he could have me. It was not an unpleasant way to die. Sleep in one half an hour. Death in fifteen minutes more."

"But what could he have told them? There was nothing anyone could prove. And he would have gotten into trouble himself."

"He wouldn't have mentioned Cramer at all. He would simply have written an anonymous note to the police. He would have told them about the others. He did not know about all of them, but he knew of one before Cramer and he suspected more."

"How many others?"

"Five." She frowned. "Six. It is unimportant. But they are all dead and the police would find something to harm me. I have not always been Helen Morland." She regarded me. "I cannot go to prison. I would die first. I would kill before I would go to prison."

"Perhaps not a prison."

Her eyes widened. "If others think I am insane, I do not mind. But do you?"

"I will have to go to the police. You know that."

"But we are different from the others. Must we obey their rules?"

"Yes."

Her face was pale. "I have never loved anyone before. Must I lose everything that I have now?"

I said nothing. I could not answer her.

"When are you going to the police?"

"I don't know."

"In the morning. That will be time enough. I will not run away. There is no place to go now. No one to wait for." She smiled faintly. "A kiss? Our only kiss?"

And then I went home. I drank and I waited.

It was cold dawn when I phoned Helen's apartment. There was no answer and I had expected none.

She had not run away, but she was gone.

And the world was lonely again.

